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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the implementation of California's 1987 policy promoting the untracking of middle schools, a reform endorsed by the state in both "Caught in the Middle" (1987) and the "English-Language Arts Framework (1987)." Specifically, the paper looks at changes in eighth-grade English tracking policies for a sample of California schools from 1986 to 1991, investigating why some schools embraced and others rejected the state's recommendation. Schools' organizational characteristics and who decided tracking policies (school or district officials) receive explicit attention. An examination of environmental factors affecting the policies of different levels of authority can contribute to an understanding of how reforms traverse, or fail to traverse, various levels of the educational system. Data were obtained from a survey of all 894 California middle schools, which elicited 373 completions, or a 41.7 response rate. Findings show that the school characteristics of graded configuration and eighth-grade student population affected the decision making of both school and district authorities, leading to a coupling of policies in two ways--by first creating institutional environments and then responding to their salient characteristics. The data suggest that state curricular reform must negotiate a complex set of interlocking influences before the state's policy ideals become the school's institutionalized practices. These influences stem from instructional, administrative, and political activities. The eventual success or failure of California's tracking reform, therefore, will be determined not only by who possesses authority over local curricular structures, but also by the organizational and political environments where this authority is discharged. Six tables are included. (Contains 29 references.) (LMI)

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Organizational Coupling and the Implementation of Tracking Reform

This article examines the implementation of California's 1987 policy promoting the untracking of middle schools, a reform endorsed by the state in both *Caught in the Middle* (California State Department of Education, 1987) and the *English-Language Arts Framework* (CSDE, 1987a). Specifically, the article looks at changes in eighth grade English tracking policies for a sample of California schools from 1986-1991, investigating why some schools embraced and others rejected the state's recommendation. Organizational characteristics of schools and who decided tracking policies, whether they were decided by school or district officials, receive explicit attention. By examining environmental factors affecting the policies of different levels of authority, one can better understand how reforms traverse (or fail to traverse) various levels of the educational system. I begin by looking at theoretical explanations of how the implementation process unfolds.

Loose Coupling and Policy Implementation

Since policies designed to change common school practices often fail in implementation, the educational system's resistance to reform is frequently attributed to congenital flaws. Put bluntly, it is argued that schools are failing because they cannot change. As pointed out by William Boyd (1987), the problem has been defined by two competing explanations of systemic intransigence, two vastly different portrayals of educational innovation's premature mortality.

One explanation locates failure in the bureaucracy, arguing

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that top-down governance stifles practitioner creativity, deskills teachers, and hamstrings local initiative (McNeil, 1986; Chubb and Moe, 1990). From this perspective, innovations are thwarted by the rules and regulations of the school system's bureaucracy. A competing, bottom-up explanation identifies obstacles at the school level, where educators interpret reforms through the lens of current practice, exploit vague language to weaken change efforts, and modify policies' fundamental aims to conform with local priorities (Cohen and Ball, 1990; DeLany, 1991; Schwille, et al., 1983). This perspective argues that school people use their proximity to instruction and learning to sustain the status quo.

The two stories' contrasting depictions of school site educators dramatize a fundamental conceptual discrepancy. On the one hand, school people are powerless to effect change. On the other hand, they are too powerful and able to resist reforms spawned by upper levels of the system. The stories share a crucial idea, however--that the power to change school practices is vested inadequately within the system. By attributing policy dissonance among the educational system's organizational levels to dispersed authority over school practices, both perspectives conceptualize public education as a loosely coupled system, a system composed of fairly insular organizational subunits: states, districts, schools, classrooms. These subunits are distinguished by their autonomous policy making and an unresponsiveness to the decisions of other levels of the system

(Weick, 1976).

In local school systems, tracking policy originates from either school or district initiative. Taken together, the top-down and bottom-up perspectives agree that a policy's place of origin in local school systems generates important consequences for its subsequent implementation.

Coupling Mechanisms and Policy Implementation

Although the loose coupling view is popular in studies of school organizations, some researchers have discovered mechanisms that coordinate the flow of policies and practices within the school system. These coupling mechanisms answer Weick's (1976) important question: What holds educational organizations together?

One line of thinking argues that institutionalized values, norms, and technical lore stake out boundaries within which all educators make decisions about schooling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer and Rowan, 1978). Policy makers respond to the prevailing symbolic definitions of what is and what is not schooling; an institutional environment emerges. As a consequence, reforms that are isomorphic with fundamental tenets of the institutional environment stand a better chance of survival than reforms that are not (Meyer and Rowan, 1978; Rowan, 1982; Cuban, 1992). As an example, the federal categorical programs created in the late 1960s and early 1970s (i.e., Chapter One, special education, bilingual education) enjoy continued support from today's federal, state, and district educators despite dramatic shifts in

the nation's political climate. The notion that schools should provide special help to certain kinds of students has become institutionalized throughout the system, tapping into an organizational affinity for programmatic differentiation and professional specialization.

Another line of research finds coordinating aspects in the relationship of each level of the educational system with schooling's technical core. One vital task of schooling, the distribution of resources necessary for learning, forges vertical connections among the system's hierarchy of offices (Gamoran and Dreeben, 1986; Barr and Dreeben, 1988). Barr and Dreeben (1983), for instance, illustrate an intricate chain of policy decisions--how a district's allocation of students to schools affects principals' allocation of students to classrooms, which affects teachers' allocation of students to working groups. The production of learning, a core function of the school system, binds the different levels of the system together. In this case, decisions about the distribution of students provide the glue for policy coherence.

These perspectives on organizational coupling argue that symbolic and strategic factors guide policy making by manifesting themselves in structure, in the organizational characteristics of school. The literature on tracking practices nominates two characteristics of schools--their population and the grade levels they serve--as possessing this kind of symbolic and strategic clout with tracking policy outcomes.

School Population, Graded Configuration, and Tracking

A 1988 study by the Johns Hopkins Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools found that the size of grade level enrollments influenced school grouping policies (Epstein and Mac Iver, 1990). Large schools were more likely to track students than were small schools. Given the positive correlation of school size and pupil-teacher ratios (Turner, et al., 1986; Jewell, 1989), constraints related to school population probably arise from practical problems of scheduling and instructing classes of students; that is, problems associated with class level characteristics (large class sizes) are created from an unfavorable transformation of school level aggregates (school populations) into smaller, more manageable units (classes). This can have implications for tracking policy, especially when teachers find large, heterogeneous classes difficult to teach (Evertson, et al., 1981). In addition, because of insufficient numbers of students to fill differentiated classes, smaller schools often embrace heterogeneous grouping as much out of necessity as philosophical commitment (Unks, 1989). Conversely, large schools often contain populations with widely diverse abilities, and students exist in sufficient numbers to fill classes offering either advanced or remedial curriculum.

Compared to the policy constraints related to population, a school's graded configuration generates influences that are more abstract. Historians of schools serving young adolescents have noted the emergence of two distinct educational philosophies--an

elementary perspective and a secondary perspective (Pray and McNamara, 1973; Eichhorn, 1980; Cuban, 1992). Not surprisingly, studies of tracking practices find heterogeneous grouping more prevalent in grade 6-8 middle schools, while tracking is more prevalent in grade 7-9 junior high schools (Cawelti, 1988; Epstein and Mac Iver, 1990). Hough's (1991) study of California schools uncovered a similar pattern of participation in most "middle school movement" reforms, including untracking, and he concurred that elementary and secondary perspectives yield policy differences between middle schools and junior highs. Untracked, heterogeneously grouped classes are closer to the elementary orientation of middle school educators; tracked, ability grouped classes are closer to the secondary, high school orientation of junior high school educators. The graded configuration of a school thus serves as a structural feature both shaping and reflecting the core educational values of an institution. As anyone familiar with the two institutions will confirm, the difference between a middle school and a junior high school is not merely one of nomenclature.

Let us take stock of the argument up to this point. My purpose is to explain differences in schools' responses to tracking reform. To accomplish this task, the organizational literature recommends scrutiny of two elements in the implementation process: the source of local tracking policy and the important organizational characteristics of schools. The tracking literature suggests that two organizational

characteristics--schools' graded configuration and student population--are salient to the formulation of tracking policies.

By synthesizing researches with primarily theoretical (organizational coupling) and primarily empirical (tracking) underpinnings, a new question emerges. Do district and school policy makers similarly respond to characteristics of schools when they consider proposals for tracking reform? If school characteristics carry different weight in the deliberations of school and district officials, the loose coupling of authority may simply overwhelm structural contingencies in the policy making process. If, on the other hand, district and school policy makers respond similarly to characteristics of schools, gaps produced by loose coupling may be bridged by influences that constrain and coordinate policies decided at both levels. Of further interest, the California untracking effort will allow us to examine the effect of reform pressure from the state on these scenarios.

Sample

In the 1990-1991 school year, I conducted a survey of all California middle school principals at schools with 6-8, 7-8, and 7-9 graded configurations. The survey asked respondents several questions about their schools' tracking policies, including the current and past number of ability grouped classes in academic subjects, whether school or district officials determined tracking policies, and who exercised influence in the creation of these policies. The 373 survey responses represent 41.7% of the

894 middle schools in the state, a response rate in line with other surveys of this type[1]. Because the sampling design allows for self-selection of respondents, however, the data can only afford preliminary tests of influences on tracking policy; therefore, generalizability of findings is limited to this sample alone.

The schools were cross categorized utilizing four pieces of information. The number of ability grouped classes in eighth grade English and the local source of tracking policies were determined from the survey responses. The schools' graded configurations were culled from the *California Public Schools Directory* (CSDE, 1990), and population figures were provided by the 1990 California Assessment Program's data base. I shall probe for trends in school grouping policies by examining cross tabulations and logit analyses of these data. I begin by looking at how schools with different graded configurations engaged in tracking reform.

Graded Configuration

Table I shows the number of schools reporting only heterogeneously grouped, untracked eighth grade English classes in 1986 and 1991. Data for both years were available from 337 schools. As the final column shows, untracking gained in popularity during this reform period. The proportion of

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[1]A 1988 national survey of the same graded forms of schools conducted by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) yielded a response rate of 29.3%; the Johns Hopkins *Education in the Middle Grades* study garnered a 56% response by mail and an additional 17% by telephone.

untracked schools increased from about one fourth of the sample (90 out of 337, or 26.7%) to nearly one half (160 out of 337, or 47.5%). All three graded configurations support this trend, with untracking growing from 32.9% to 54.4% of grade 6-8 schools, from 24.5% to 46.0% of 7-8 grade schools, and from 10.0% to 25.0% of 7-9 schools. Though all three graded configurations experienced change in their tracking structures, the relative support for untracking among the three graded forms remained stable. The 6-8 schools remained the most likely to untrack, the 7-9 schools the most likely to track, and the 7-8 schools somewhere in between but closer to the 6-8 schools in policy. A school's graded configuration strongly influenced its tracking policies both before and after a period of reform.

TABLE I

Percentage of Schools With Untracked Eighth Grade English Curriculum
(By Graded Configuration)

Year	Grades 6-8	Grades 7-8	Grades 7-9	Total
1986	(32.9%)	(24.5%)	(10.0%)	(26.7%)
1991	(54.4%)	(46.0%)	(25.0%)	(47.5%)
N	158	139	40	337

Table II disaggregates the sample by the reported level of policy making in 1991. The final column's figures are interesting. While only 33.3% of the 153 schools with a district source of tracking policy offered an untracked English curriculum in 1991, 58.1% of the schools deciding their own tracking policy managed to do so. In addition to grade levels, who decided

TABLE II

Percentage of Schools With Untracked Eighth Grade English Curriculum
(By 1991 Source of Tracking Policy and Graded Configuration)

1991 Policy Source	Year	Grades 6-8	Grades 7-8	Grades 7-9	Total
District	1986	(27.4%)	(21.9%)	(3.7%)	(20.9%)
	1991	(41.9%)	(31.1%)	(18.5%)	(33.3%)
	N	62	64	27	153
School	1986	(36.7%)	(25.7%)	(16.7%)	(30.8%)
	1991	(62.2%)	(57.1%)	(33.3%)	(58.1%)
	N	90	70	12	172
Grand N		152	134	39	325

tracking policy also mattered in the policy adopted, with school policy makers more likely to untrack English curriculum than district policy makers.

Schools joined the state in favoring untracking, while districts were reluctant, a pattern with interesting implications for the top-down versus bottom-up argument. If district level decisions favored heterogeneous grouping, we would have a classic case of top-down implementation--a state initiated reform enforced by districts and carried out by schools. This is not happening. The untracking of California's middle schools appears to be following a bottom-up implementation course, but not quite the way the theoreticians have envisioned. The conclusion we make concerning the direction of dispersion within the three tiered educational system depends on which two rungs of the hierarchy are examined. Although untracking's diffusion is occurring across many schools, the bottom-up support only exists

in the school-district relationship. In the district-state relationship, support for untracking is flowing from the top of the system downward--from the state bureaucracy, not from districts. By gaining support at the state and school levels, untracking, in effect, has skipped a rung in the implementation ladder. In the concluding discussion, I will reexamine the top-down versus bottom-up views in light of these findings and present some reasons for school and district policy differences on the tracking issue.

In Table 2, the graded configuration patterns within both policy source subsamples look similar to the pattern for the whole sample: schools serving grades 6-8 are the most likely to untrack, 7-8 schools the next most likely, and 7-9 schools the least likely. Whether resolved by school or district policy makers, the tracking issue elicits disparate responses from educators governing the different graded configurations of schools.

To quantify the grade level effect for 1991, I cross-categorized the 325 schools providing complete information[2] on graded configuration, policy source, and eighth grade English tracking policy (creating a dummy dependent variable). I then ran logit analyses of the data to generate parameter estimates, standard errors, and odds ratios for a model fitting tracking

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[2]Non-respondents to the following items were dropped from the analyses: 31 schools for 1986 policy, 5 schools for 1991 policy, and 12 additional schools where policy source could not be determined.

policy to policy source and graded configuration.

TABLE III

Logit Analysis of the Effect of Policy Source and Graded Configuration on Eighth Grade English Tracking Policy
(*estimate at least twice its standard error)

VARIABLE	P.E. (S.E.)	ODDS RATIO
Constant	-.3862 (.2161)	
School Policy Source	.9285* (.2350)	2.53 to 1
Grades 7-8	-.3208 (.2444)	1.38 to 1
Grades 7-9	-1.152* (.4236)	3.16 to 1
Model G^2=0.294, 2 df		

The results of the logit treatment are displayed in Table III. The G^2 statistic at the bottom of the table indicates that the model provides an excellent fit to the data (G^2 < model's degrees of freedom). Positive parameter estimates indicate conditions favoring untracking, negative estimates--tracking. The parameter estimates (P.E.'s) for both school policy source and grades 7-9 are significant. With graded configuration held constant, schools deciding their own tracking policies were more likely to untrack in 1991 than schools where districts decided policies for them. And schools serving 7th-9th grades were more likely to track their students than 6-8 schools, whether their policies were created by school or by district educators.

The odds ratios express the estimates in concrete terms--the effect of the independent variables on the odds of schools

untracking eighth grade English. When school policy makers determine their own tracking policies, for instance, the odds of untracked curriculum increase by a factor of 2.53 compared to when districts determine policy, a more than doubling of chances that holds over all graded configurations in the model. In comparison to 6-8 grade schools, a 7-9 graded configuration more than triples (3.16 to 1) the chances that tracking will occur, regardless of whether the policy is determined by district or school officials.

Thus, in 1991, whether schools served grades 7-9 or grades 6-8 made a significant difference in their tracking policies, as did who created the policies. Tracking policy was coupled by the effect of graded configuration and uncoupled by the effect of policy source.

Population

Table IV displays the breakdown of schools offering untracked eighth grade English programs by the schools' eighth grade student populations. The tracking policies of schools

TABLE IV

Percentage of Schools With Untracked Eighth Grade English Curriculum
(By Eighth Grade Student Population)

Year	1-200	201-300	301-400	401+	Total
1986	(44.4%)	(17.3%)	(20.5%)	(21.0%)	(26.7%)
1991	(69.7%)	(36.7%)	(38.5%)	(40.3%)	(47.5%)
N	99	98	78	62	337

serving 200 or fewer eighth grade students stand out. In 1986 about 44% of the schools in this sample offered a single level of English for their eighth graders, compared to 17%-21% for schools serving a larger number of students. After the untracking push from the state, this gap remained. In 1991, almost 70% of the schools with 200 or fewer eighth grade students offered an untracked curriculum, while the percentage of larger schools ranged from 36-40%. If a population of 200 eighth graders is used to establish a dichotomy, we can say that small schools tended to untrack and large schools to track. This pattern existed before and after the state's push for untracking. (Interestingly, if we single out schools with more than 200 students, we see a slight positive correlation between untracking and school size. The relationship between school size and untracking is thus not strictly a linear one.)

TABLE V

Percentage of Schools With Untracked Eighth Grade English Curriculum
(By Policy Source and Eighth Grade Student Population)

Policy Source	Year	1-200	201-300	301-400	401+	Total
District	1986	(43.3%)	(16.0%)	(15.9%)	(13.8%)	(20.9%)
	1991	(56.6%)	(24.0%)	(27.3%)	(34.5%)	(33.3%)
	N	30	50	44	29	153
School	1986	(44.6%)	(20.0%)	(25.8%)	(23.3%)	(30.8%)
	1991	(75.4%)	(47.8%)	(51.6%)	(43.3%)	(58.1%)
	N	65	46	31	30	172
Grand N		95	96	75	59	325

Table V disaggregates the population data by source of

tracking policy. As was true with the disaggregation by graded configuration, the pattern for the whole sample holds up across policy source and over time frame. Regardless of whether tracking policy originated at the district or school level, schools with eighth grade populations of 200 or fewer students were more likely to untrack than schools with larger populations.

TABLE VI

Logit Analysis of the Effect of Policy Source and Eighth Grade Student Population on Eighth Grade English Tracking Policy
(*estimate at least twice its standard error)

VARIABLE	P.E. (S.E.)	ODDS RATIO
Constant	.2579 (.2716)	
School Policy Source	.8677* (.2405)	2.38 to 1
Pop 201-300	-1.302* (.3153)	3.68 to 1
Pop 301-400	-1.156* (.3354)	3.18 to 1
Pop 401+	-1.168* (.3553)	3.22 to 1
Model $G^2 = 1.169$, 3 df		

Table VI presents the logit analysis for 1991 tracking policy explained by population and source of policy. The parameter estimates for all levels of the explanatory variables are significant. Regardless of student population, a school source of policy more than doubled the odds of heterogeneous grouping in eighth grade. Whether tracking policy was decided by districts or schools, schools with more than 200 eighth graders

were at least three times more likely than their smaller counterparts to track eighth grade English. These data clearly indicate that district and school officials took different stances on curricular differentiation, but for both levels of policy making, decisions were influenced by the size of the school eighth grade population.

Let us summarize these schools' untracking experience before reconsidering the theories of policy implementation and organizational coupling presented earlier. Since the release of *Caught in the Middle* in 1987, heterogeneous grouping of eighth grade English curriculum has grown in popularity among the schools in this sample. Who decided the tracking issue mattered in the type of policy enacted. District policy makers were more likely to maintain curricular differentiation; school policy makers were more likely to adopt heterogeneous grouping. Despite these differences, however, policy created at both levels was constrained by characteristics of schools. Heterogeneous grouping found a more hospitable reception in grade 6-8 schools than in grade 7-9 schools. The reform was also more likely to occur in schools with 200 or fewer students than in larger schools. In sum, different curricular structures were supported by district and by school levels of authority, but the exercise of this authority was constrained by common phenomena.

Discussion

The top-down and bottom-up perspectives on policy implementation place great importance on where reforms originate

in educational organizations. The data we have examined confirm that policy source is part of untracking's implementation story--but not the whole story. Before considering the limitations of this emphasis, however, the general point demands attention. School and district policy makers have diverged in their response to California's push for heterogeneous grouping in middle schools. Why the difference?

Part of the answer lies in the manner in which each level of the system is connected to the larger environment. School level policy making is rarely conducted in public forums. Policies adopted by faculty deliberation or unilaterally decided by school principals need not afford input from disgruntled parents. Moreover, educators who work with active parents on a day-to-day basis can take steps to alleviate concerns before they get organized into interest groups. Thus, with professional norms rapidly shifting towards support of heterogeneous grouping and away from tracking[3], many schools are able to untrack their structures even when the political environment is hostile to the reform.

In contrast, district educational governance is a public affair. Organized groups of teachers, parents, and taxpayers debate proposals brought before democratically elected school boards, and the local media cover deliberations. When school boards consider controversial topics, and the untracking effort

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[3]When the English Journal asked its readers to comment on the tracking issue in 1990, not a single respondent defended the practice (English Journal, 1990).

has been quite controversial in some communities, compromises may be struck to dissipate political conflict. These compromises may mean heterogeneous grouping for some subjects, some grade levels, or some schools, but not for all. Parents whose children are in honors courses have vehemently opposed efforts to abolish accelerated courses, and since the district is their final place of appeal, policies decided by districts may reflect this opposition (Intercom, 1989). Thus, in the case of tracking, local political considerations exist that constrain district level policy outcomes (Oakes and Lipton, 1992).

These politics limit the usefulness of loose coupling in conceptualizing policy implementation. Viewing the implementation of educational policy solely on the basis of how power is distributed within the school system--focusing on the politics occurring between organizational offices--ignores the impact of external politics on policy implementation. Indeed, the loose coupling of policy noted by researchers may be more a reflection of how educational officials connect differently with external political forces than an accurate portrait of how authority is shared by offices within the organization. The state's and schools' support for untracking suggests the formation of potent reform coalitions at the state and school levels, while coalitions supporting tracking crystalize at the district level.

The top-down and bottom-up perspectives on implementation, then, run the risk of generating irrelevant remedies when reforms

fail. One potential prescription recommends tighter policing of local authorities by the state, with rewards and sanctions for compliance with state reform. Other potential prescriptions demand upper level decisions that are more representative of school level concerns or the radical devolution of authority to local policy makers. By concentrating on education's organizational interior, these remedies fail to address the impact of influences outside the bureaucracy on the conduct of schooling.

Besides ignoring the open nature of the school system, these solutions also provide content-free explanations when school reforms fail, finding deficiencies in the faulty machinery of system instead of the faulty edict of policy. In fact, this rationalization for the failure of reform--that the system itself is to blame--diverts our attention away from the substance of a failed reform, away from questioning a reform's universality, for instance: that it is always good for all schools everywhere. This is unfortunate. The modification of reforms to bolster chances for implementation may spawn promising new ideas about the improvement of education.

The two coupling theories I have discussed do compel questions of substance, however, focusing this study's attention on how untracking interacts with a crucial activity of the school system, the dividing up of thousands of students for the delivery of instruction. Grouping students for instruction, be it by age into grades or by area of residence into schools or by ability

levels into tracks, not only touches upon profound symbols that define education, but also commands the pragmatic attention of those who must make real schools work every day. By influencing both district and school policy makers' consideration of tracking, the other ways students are grouped harmonize tracking policy across levels of authority, and as pointed out earlier, qualify the study's support for loose coupling perspectives.

In sum, even though graded configuration and eighth grade student population are characteristics of schools, they have an impact on the decision making of both school and district authorities, coupling policies in two ways. First, district administrators assign students to schools in certain numbers and decide the grade levels that schools serve. These divisions structure the symbolic environments in which tracking and untracking are considered. Policy, regardless of origin, responds to these identifying properties of school. Second, both district and school policy makers pragmatically consider the characteristics of the schools for which tracking policy is created, especially the size of student enrollments and the impact of untracking on the core functions of teaching and learning. Both of these mechanisms--creating institutional environments and then responding to their salient characteristics--serve to coordinate policy emanating from a loosely coupled authority structure.

This study suggests that state curricular reform must negotiate a complex set of interlocking influences before the

state's policy ideals become the schools' institutionalized practices. These influences issue from activities giving life to school systems--instructional, administrative, and political activities. The eventual success or failure of California's tracking reform, therefore, will be determined not only by who possesses authority over local curricular structures, but also by the organizational and political environments where this authority is discharged.

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